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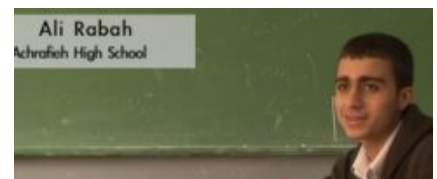
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The recent agreement on providing Albanian-language textbooks for schools in southern Serbia suggests that lessons have been learned from previous relations between Serbia's Albanian minority, Kosovo, and Albania, and on the role that kin-states can play in southern Serbia's development.

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By Laura Wis

On October 1, Alexander Vucic and Edi Rama, the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Albania, respectively, met Albanian representatives from Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja during the launch of a new Serbia-Albania business forum. Following the meeting, the Coordination Body for the Municipalities of Bujanovac and Medvedja **announced** that an agreement had been reached on providing Albanian-language textbooks for schools in the three southern municipalities.

Details of who will be providing the textbooks remain unclear, although it is reasonable to expect that they will be imported from Albania. This agreement not only marks the latest effort by local representatives to reduce socio-economic inequalities for the Albanian minority in Serbia, but also Albania's continued kin-state attention to one of Serbia's most underdeveloped regions.

The announcement's modalities and the agreement itself, however, suggest that lessons have been learned from previous relations between Serbia's Albanian minority, Kosovo, and Albania, and on the role that kin-states can play in southern Serbia's development.

Breaking the deadlock over minority-language education

Socio-economic development initiatives to **prevent conflict** in the Presevo valley have been ongoing since the publication of the so-called 'Covic Plan' in February 2000, during the armed conflict between the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UÇPMB), and federal Yugoslav security forces. In addition to plans for investment, infrastructure development and measures to improve employment, access to modern textbooks in the Albanian language is cited by the **Albanian National Minority Council** as a key issue for improving educational standards in southern Serbia, and implementing domestic and international commitments to minority rights.

A previous deal between Belgrade and Pristina's education ministries to send Albanian-language textbooks to Presevo unravelled in September 2015, when the Serbian government objected to the educational content, claiming that the books taught '**history from a Kosovo Albanian perspective**'. The textbooks were detained by Serbian customs authorities, which led to protests and a class boycott by Albanians in Presevo and Bujanovac, and **direct action** by

Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) activists in Kosovo, who overturned a truck transporting Serbian goods.

Interestingly, rather than attempting to resolve the failed Belgrade-Pristina deal, the Serbian government has now tried to source the missing educational resources from elsewhere, and in particular, from a partner that Serbia recognises as a sovereign state – not considers as its own disputed territory.

Including Albania in minority education provision in Presevo suggests that this is not only more convenient for Belgrade, but also more palatable, as it gives Kosovo's government fewer opportunities to act as a supportive kin-state to Albanians in neighbouring countries. This is especially important in the case of Presevo, as in 1992 Albanians in the three municipalities voted in a referendum to unify the region with a future independent Kosovo. Although these claims have become more sporadic in recent years, local leaders frequently compare Albanians' status and territorial position in Serbia with that of the Serb minority in Kosovo's four northern municipalities, attempting to integrate themselves into the Pristina-Belgrade normalization dialogue. As highlighted by a parliamentary **exchange** between the Serbian Foreign Minister, Ivica Dacic, and Riza Halimi, the leader of the Party for Democratic Action (PDA), Belgrade does not fully encourage cooperation between Albanians in Serbia and Kosovo, and ultimately has the power to decide who imports what.

Diplomatic lessons and opportunities

The trilateral nature of the Nis meeting, with both Prime Ministers in attendance, is a diplomatic improvement on Rama's last visit to southern Serbia in October 2014. Following a Belgrade press conference in which Rama vocally supported Kosovo's independence, he then met Albanian representatives in a well-publicised visit to Presevo. Whilst the visit was supported by Zoran Stankovic, head of the Coordination Body, reports of banners with the words 'Welcome Mr. Prime Minister' and Rama's **comments** that Albania would "not allow the assimilation of Albanians in this area" led many Serbian media outlets to frame it as a provocative gesture.

Although Rama also emphasized the need for Albanians in Serbia to co-operate with the Serbian government during his 2014 visit to Presevo, Vucic's attendance this time makes it harder for the domestic press to misrepresent Rama's presence as whipping up irredentism in a subversive minority.

It also gave Vucic a chance to appear serious about preserving the legacy of the Covic Plan, rather than simply delegating responsibility to the Coordination Body, the Albanian government, and the German Embassy in

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Belgrade, who pledged support for a Serbian initiative to redevelop a school sports hall in Presevo. In a country where the Prime Minister seemingly has his finger in every pie, and certainly every photo opportunity, his absence from Presevo during Rama's last visit was noticeable. As the perceived inequality of Albanians in southern Serbia was a grievance expressly linked to the insurgency in 2000-2001, the central government's commitment to developing and investing in the region is not an insignificant **factor** for minority leaders' willingness to participate in Serbian state structures.

Implementation – the proof is in the pudding

The Belgrade-Pristina textbook deal in 2015 was welcome until it wasn't, with Belgrade waiting until the books were at the border before raising objections over the content. Therefore, the new Serbia-Albania agreement can only really be evaluated once textbooks are actually delivered to schools in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja. However, the inclusion of the Serbian Prime Minister in discussions between Albanian minority representatives and their kin-state shows that the Serbian government is taking a more active role in facilitating the third-party provision of minority rights goods.

Whether this is a new approach to majority-minority relations, or simply a convenient by-product of the Nis forum, remains to be seen; as does whether this latest agreement to support Albanian-language education in southern Serbia will actually come to fruition.

***Laura Wise** is a Research Analyst for the DFID-funded Political Settlements Research Programme at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include national minorities, kin-state politics, inclusive peace processes, and power-sharing in South-Eastern Europe. You can follow Laura on Twitter – [@auttonwise](#)*

*The views presented in this piece do not necessarily reflect those of **TransConflict**.*

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